

THE COLOUR BAR

THE progress of Catholicism in Africa is so amazing that only the divine character of the Church can explain it. Yet we realize how much remains to be done when we recall the millions of coloured people still untouched by Christianity. And the need is urgent not only amongst indigenous negroes, but also amongst those of such a country as the United States, where live many millions of negroes crying out for the religion of God made Man. In the centre of New York is Harlem, the negro quarter, a town in itself well-nigh cut off from the neighbouring boroughs of Manhattan and Bronx, whilst in the southern States live many millions of negroes in far worse poverty and distress than in the days of slavery. These people want religion, for their simple nature is a religious one. But they are unwilling to accept the Christian religion as they see it practised, or rather distorted and falsified, by the whites. They want rather the riches and power that go with modern materialism and irreligion.

The story of the negro in U.S.A. is a sad one. Every year waves of horror and anger shake the whole of the negro population as fresh lynchings occur with a brutality that is unsurpassed by any other age in the history of this world. The Chinese torture of a thousand slices cannot be more cruel than the white southerner's use of a blow-lamp on a negro suspected of crime.

Are Catholics in the United States, or in the Union of South Africa, caring for these people, influencing them, as they ought? In the days of the Roman Empire there existed slavery, and that slavery was ended by the Catholic doctrine that by nature and birth all men are equal before God. But that doctrine is not fulfilled until this colour question is no more, whatever the initial practical difficulties involved. The Catholic Faith was made for man, and unless ignorance or prejudice unconsciously perverts the

mind against it, all men turn to it as by nature; and this is especially so with simple, unsophisticated folk, like the negroes. In native Africa the results of this are easily seen in the thousands of converts. In the United States, in South Africa, and in other localities where the negro has been exploited by the white, there is a very different story. Why?

Here is the story of a Harlem negro who holds the highest degrees of some six universities. He went to a Catholic university to take a post-graduate course because he was interested in Catholicism and wanted to meet it at close quarters. He finished his course and was examined for his D.Ph. At the end of a very stiff vocal examination, the examiner walked in silence to the door, opened it, and turned to the board of examiners and said in a loud voice: 'The gentleman has answered every question perfectly, but I do not think that a Catholic university should offer its highest honours to a negro.' He slammed the door as he walked out.¹ That negro, a natural leader among his own people, is not yet a Catholic.

The story of Paul Robeson describes the problem very well.

Paul Robeson is to-day either a Communist or very friendly with them; yet he was brought up a Christian. His father was a slave who at the age of fifteen ran away, worked his way through Lincoln University and became a minister. He married Maria Bustil, a member of a famous negro family, of which one was a painter of repute, another organised the Scarlet Pimpernel service of the United States, the underground railroad that helped negroes to escape from slavery and to receive first class education, while yet another founded the Free African Society.

From the account given by Mrs. Paul Robeson in her biography of her husband, his father, the Rev. William

¹ Perhaps an extreme case; but it is at least evidence of an attitude of mind that must be changed at all costs,

Robeson, was an outstanding Christian, a good man, loved and respected by all who came into contact with him.

At school Paul was brilliant in scholarship and in sport. Yet his father was not satisfied, and by insisting on perfection he prevented Paul from being conceited, a common failing notably lacking in him to-day. In his youth Paul became a superintendent in the Sunday School. In his University days at Rutgers he was elected to the 'Cap and Skull,' a select body of the four men who most truly and fully represented the finest ideals of Rutgers University.

In 1923 he obtained a brilliant law degree at Columbia University. This must have been the turning point in his life. He had proved himself master of almost everything, and yet he had no future. He had now reached the age and the position when the colour bar really began to count. His football, baseball, and basket-ball triumphs now meant nothing; his scholastic record and his brilliant degree meant nothing; his debating and his running meant nothing. He was black; and therefore he was crowded back into Harlem, that town within a town where thousands of negroes are herded into a few blocks and denied normal intercourse with their white neighbours. This must have been bitter to him. Protestantism has not in itself the means of keeping such a man going under such trials. Things might have been so different if he had known the fullness of Catholicism then—and never met the failings of Catholics.

Despairing of a career that would have been his undoubtedly had his skin been of another colour, Robeson turned to the stage. He played with marked success in *Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* with the Provincetown Players. But he found his true metier in a concert of negro music that he gave. One critic wrote of this that the singer 'voiced the sorrows and hopes of a people.' That is the clue to all his later life, and it becomes more and more clear as he develops his new-found talent. Even in his commercial films, even in the days

when he had to obey producers, the motive is the saving of his people. Even in such a film as *Sanders of the River* that was the motive, though the salvation consisted in no more than his people's loyalty to the British Empire. In other pictures he has made one can see better, perhaps, the story of his own dreams. And his power is in his voice, as Samson's strength was in his hair, and through it he may well become a leader of his people.

His effect upon his hearers, even amongst the whites, has been well described in the words of James Douglas, who wrote (*Daily Express*, July, 1928) of the concert of negro spirituals given by Paul Robeson in Drury Lane:

He is more than a great actor or a great singer. He is a great man who creates the soul of a people in bondage and shows you its true kinship with the fettered soul of man . . . his mastery of all our holiest emotions . . . We saw the rapt mysticism gathering in intensity until it reached the height of the mood . . . his songs are the Bible as we heard it at our mother's knee. They are the mother songs of mankind . . . it is the sad soul of humanity reaching out into the mystery of life and death.

Paul Robeson is a great man, an idealist who would save his people from their bondage. But, unaware of truths of the Incarnation and the teaching of the Church of God, for him that salvation is to be found only in economic and political freedom. Yet because he has a naturally spiritual soul this does not satisfy him. There is a chapter in his biography that seems to suggest that the Sermon on the Mount would have a tremendous appeal to him; and small wonder, for he is a man of ideals about the brotherhood of man, and in that discourse of Our Lord is to be found the expression of the highest ideals of human brotherhood. We believe that Robeson would appreciate the *Rerum Novarum* or *Quadragesimo Anno* far more than many of those for whom it was more directly intended. Moreover, he is a power amongst his fellow negroes. They love him and would follow him. He is not just a negro, but the

personification of his race. One critic wrote of his singing of 'Water Boy,' a genuine folk-song with a joyous background, that he revealed more of the true personality of his race in this song than half a dozen learned writings and discourses. Instinctively the negro realises this and loves him for it. And it is probably true to say that if only Paul Robeson had the gift of the Catholic faith he could convert tens of thousands of his people in the States to the same faith and find for them the salvation and freedom that he desires for them but does not know. Without such faith he might perhaps still lead them; but whither?

Meantime, white men have dug a gap between themselves, their culture, even their religion, and their black brothers. One negro poet cries:

Ever at Thy glowing altar
Must my heart grow sick and falter,
wishing He I served were black,

.....
Surely then this flesh would know
Yours had borne a kindred woe.
Lord, I fashion dark gods, too,
Daring even to give You
Dark despairing features

.....
Lord forgive me if my need
Sometimes shapes a human need.²

That gap must be bridged.

Beginnings have been made. For instance, in Harlem a white woman, Baroness de Hueck, has a 'Friendship House,' and with her crusade in favour of 'Christ the Negro' is beginning to pierce the skin of black New York. The comparatively few white priests in Harlem, in the negro belt of U.S.A., and elsewhere, who are occupied with the negro, are doing splendid and heroic work. The scarcity of priests and of funds hampers the efforts of those who see the need. And not enough people see the need. More

² From *Heritage*, by Countee Cullen,

must be done. The Catholic laity must become aware of this harvest field and of their own obligations and powers.

We have a patron for the work, a negro and a Dominican, Blessed Martin de Porres. He was not a full-blooded negro, it is true, for his father was a Spaniard. But perhaps he is all the better patron for that, because in Harlem, as in other negro quarters, where for hundreds of years negresses have been the playthings of white men, the majority of the negroes have Aryan blood in them.

Martin was born at Lima in 1579, his mother being a negress. His father, Don Juan de Porres, refused to acknowledge him as his son because the boy had inherited the racial features of his mother's people. Later Don Juan deserted the mother and her child, who had to exist as best they could in poverty-stricken surroundings and sordid social conditions, members of a despised race. But after a few years, when Martin was eight, his sincere piety had already made people remark on him and comment on the father who had deserted him and his mother. The father, who visited Lima frequently in the course of his official duties, heard these comments, eventually sent Martin to school for two years, and then apprenticed him to a surgeon. This was a happy moment for Martin, for now he could really help the poor whom he already loved dearly.

His apprenticeship finished, Martin went to the Dominicans in Lima and begged to be admitted as a tertiary, his humility preventing him applying for admittance as a brother in the First Order. From the age of fifteen until he was twenty-four he worked in that Priory as a tertiary, wearing the white tunic, with the black hood and black cloak of the Third Order. At twenty-four his superiors ordered him to enter the First Order as a lay-brother, his duties being those of barber and infirmarian. But his activities were not confined to the Priory, for wherever in Lima poor people needed help, medical or bodily, Martin came

readily and by his life and his precepts left them better off in soul as well as in more material ways.

In a modern House of Hospitality Martin would feel very much at home. When he gave a bed to tramps who were dirty and people complained that he did not make them wash, he would answer: 'Compassion, my dear brother, is of more importance than cleanliness. Remember that I can easily wash my sheets with a little soap, but no torrent of tears could wash off my soul the stain that would have been made there by any unkindness to the unfortunate.' Every day many poor people came to Martin at the Priory, in need of food, of clothes, of advice. At first he found room for those needing shelter in a nearby hospice, and when this was crowded he even used his cell. In the end he was bringing so many into the Priory that the regular life of the community was destroyed, and the Provincial had to forbid it. Then a house was given to him, and he opened this as a House of Hospitality. It has been estimated that Martin found the means to feed daily some 160 poor people, besides the many families he helped, mainly negroes. To care for the many homeless children in Lima he collected the money to start an orphanage dedicated to the Holy Cross. All his life he spent thus helping the poor and downtrodden, and particularly those of his own colour, the most despised of all.

On November 3rd, 1639, Martin died. On September 10th, 1837, he was proclaimed Blessed. In 1926 the cause of his canonisation was reopened in Rome. In 1939 we shall observe the third centenary of his death. Would that our prayers and devotion to Blessed Martin, the patron of the negroes, of the oppressed and of social justice, could secure his canonisation in this same year. If only such men as Robeson and other great-souled negroes, who see their people's sorrow and in their hearts know that material and political progress is not what their souls crave, if such men could accept Blessed Martin, a fellow negro, as their patron and guide, their work for the salvation of a down-

trodden people would have real hope of a success undreamed of. Meantime, there is our own important part in this apostolate that we may not shirk.

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THE LESSON OF STANDARDISATION

THE same clothes, the same swing music, the same technological thinking, the same standardised responses, the same dances, the same transport communications: in other words, the same standardisation all the world over. 'This uniformity is quite another thing than a structure of civilisation properly speaking, it is of an order not specifically human.'¹ The Manichee, in his contradictory thinking, desired to attain to a univocal perfection, to be swallowed up in the principle of good like a Buddhist in his Nirvana, to negate his own body to the point of race-suicide, a Pharisee concerning matter and profoundly anti-social. Modern man is an inverted Manichee: again desiring a univocal perfection, in a dialectic not of spirit but of matter, regarding the spirit as nothing or hating it as evil, enslaving mind and responsibility to the evolution of technique, exalting his own blood in the interests of race purity, exploiting and commercialising intelligence, and profoundly anti-personal. How true that Marx is the obverse of Hegel. The outcome of such mass-education is anarchy of thinking and feeling, against which we childishly protect ourselves by the sameness of our clothes.

Let us isolate one noteworthy aspect of this situation. To much modern thinking, the intelligence is a dangerous faculty, an anti-vital machine that skims the cream off things, that divides person from person and class from class, like the cathode rays that disintegrate alpha particles: it

¹ J. Maritain, *Questions de Conscience*, p. 44.